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# The reconfiguration of the European Archive in contemporary German-Jewish migrant-literature

Katja Petrowskaja's novel *Vielleicht Esther*

JESSICA ORTNER

**ABSTRACT** • A considerable number of Eastern European migrant authors of Jewish origin are currently lifting Holocaust memory to a new level. Writing in German about events taking place in remote areas of the world, they expand the German framework of memory from a national to a transnational one. By partaking in reconsidering what is 'vital for a shared remembering' of Europe, this branch of writing reflects the European Union's political concern for integrating the memories of the socialistic regimes in European history writing without relativising the Holocaust. In *Vielleicht Esther*, Katja Petrowskaja consults various national and private archives in order to recount the history of the mass shooting of over 30,000 Ukrainian Jews at Babij Jar – a canyon near Kiev. Thus, she 'carries' a marginalised event of the Holocaust into the German framework of memory and uncovers the layers of amnesia that have not only concealed the event amongst the Soviet public but also distorted and for ever made inaccessible her family's past.

More than half a century after the end of the Second World War and the liberation of the concentration camps, the children and grandchildren of the survivors still struggle to come to terms with the Holocaust – an event that brought out the most unimaginable evil in the midst of the civilised world. The loss of embodied knowledge of the event has led to the development of various means to store information and to reconstruct personal experiences which were never transmitted to the present generations. The tendency of second- and third-generation descendants of survivors to compensate for this lack of family memory by means of literary writing has already been widely investigated.<sup>1</sup> Marianne Hirsch coined the term 'post-memory' in order to define the spe-

cial relationship that 'the generation after bears to the personal, collective or cultural trauma of those who came before' (Hirsch 2008: 106). In this article, I wish to turn to a special branch of second- and third-generation writing, namely German Jewish literature written by authors with an Eastern European background. As they have memories and post-memories of both the National Socialist occupation and the subsequent terror of the Nazi regime, I suggest that they lift second-generation Holocaust memory to another level. I show this by analysing Katja Petrowskaja's novel *Vielleicht Esther* ('Maybe Esther', 2015) – in which Petrowskaja presents the legacy of the Holocaust as well as her experiences of the Soviet regime during her childhood and youth in Kiev. Her way of employing an Eastern perspective on the devastating aspects of the European past is typical of a wave of Eastern European writers who currently have a significant influence on the German book

1 See e.g. Grimwood 2007, McGothlin 2006, Schlachter 2006, Flanzbaum 2012, Berger 2010, Gilman and Steinecke 2002.

market.<sup>2</sup> By exploring interconnections between two great European traumas, the Holocaust and the Gulag (Assmann 2013, Leggewie and Lang 2011), they contest the view of the Holocaust as the pivotal trauma of Europe and at the same time recontextualise the Holocaust in its specific local environment.

This aesthetic practice has political implications as it deals with a question which has become an urgent matter for the memory politics of the European Union. As Oliver Plessow puts it, European memory actors ever since the Eastern Enlargement of the European Union

have immersed themselves in one of the most abrasive conflicts of interpretation history has to offer, finding themselves negotiating between two major competing ‘memory frames’ ... on the one hand, the understanding that the Holocaust as a unique event should remain Europe’s sole moral and political compass, and on the other hand, the view (bolstered by the eastern European countries that joined the EU in 2004) that Nazism and Communism must be remembered as equally menacing ‘totalitarian’ dictatorships. (Plessow 2015: 379)

I begin by outlining the remarkable development of the Holocaust from a largely ignored event in the immediate post-war years into a politically relevant memory for the European Union. Afterwards, I describe the memory contest between the Eastern and the Western parts of the European Union, which, since the Eastern enlargement, has arisen from this development. Against the backdrop of this political landscape, I analyse Katja Petrowskaja’s novel *Vielleicht*

*Esther* and show how the novel reinterprets the ‘dividing line between what is forgettable and what is valuable’ for those who are concerned with European history writing (Rigney 2008: 80).

### Political developments - the global institutionalisation of Holocaust memory

Using the metaphor of a crescendo, Aleida Assmann has shown that the increased distance from the Second World War has not resulted in a decline but rather in a growing public attention on the Holocaust (Assmann 2013: 56–9). After having been almost completely ignored during the 1950s, from 1960 on a growing awareness of the dimensions of the Holocaust arose, first manifesting itself in Germany and later spreading to the entire Western world. Decisive moments in the recognition of the event amongst the German public were the Auschwitz trials in 1965 and, to an even greater degree, the broadcasting of the American TV-serial *Holocaust* at the end of the 1970s. By the 1980s, the commemoration of the Holocaust was institutionalised as a political concern of the German government. Shortly before the turn of the millennium, in 1999, the German Bundestag decided to place a Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe at the core of Germany’s capital. Thereby, the event was given a tangible and lasting place in the cultural memory of the reunited Germany. The memorial, finished in 2005, established the Holocaust as a negative founding myth that was meant to oblige every future government to uphold the rights of minorities and to ensure a peaceful cooperation with world society (Assmann 2013: 67; Thierse 2005).<sup>3</sup> Paradoxically, by

2 For a thorough overview of this development, see Brigid Haines 2008. According to Haines (2008: 136), Eastern European migrant writers have now superseded the important group of Turkish-German writers both ‘in terms of numbers and new voices’.

3 I refer to the following sentence uttered by the former German president, Wolfgang Thierse, at the opening ceremony of the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin: ‘No other nation, wrote the American Judaic scholar James E. Young, has ever undertaken to

officially embedding guilt at the core of its collective memory, Germany, the perpetrator country per se, became a pioneer for a particularly rigorous way of addressing the past that is admired and imitated around the world today. From the year 2000 on, 'the Holocaust was transformed into a transnational memory and turned into an ultimate "moral touchstone" making "the need to avoid another Holocaust ... a foundation for (official) European memory" too (Assmann 2010b: 98; Levy and Sznajder 2006: 18, 184). Nevertheless, as Aleida Assmann points out, the development of the Holocaust into a transnational memory runs the risk of de-territorialising and unifying the event as a common moral norm. Already in 1996, the former German president Roman Herzog paradigmatically expressed the view of the Holocaust as a collective educational measure. In a speech held on the occasion of the official Memorial Day for the victims of the Holocaust on 27 January 1996, he stated that the commemoration of the past should not let us 'freeze in horror', but help us learn a lesson that can be a guideline for future generations.<sup>4</sup>

"reunite itself on the bedrock memory of its crimes" or to "place the remembrance of these crimes at the geographical center of its capital city" – a task, therefore, at the very limits of what is possible for a social community' (translated by Thomas Dunlap for the homepage German History in Documents and Images (GHDI)). Assmann (2013: 78–81) emphasises that the consolidation of a negative memory as the founding myth of a community is an entirely new phenomenon. Traditionally, nations or other social communities have neglected negative and shameful parts of the past and instead focused on heroic deeds or tragic defeat. Turkey's neglect of the Armenian genocide is a living example of this practice.

- 4 'Warum diese Rückschau heute, nach über 50 Jahren? Warum vor allem unser Wille, die Erinnerung lebendig zu halten? Wäre nicht auch der Wunsch verständlich, Gewesenes zu vergessen, die Wunden vernarben und die

At the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust in 2000, representatives from forty-six governments agreed on a declaration that similarly expressed the intention to 'plant the seeds of a better future amidst the soil of a bitter past'.<sup>5</sup> The conference was the starting point for the foundation of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) that, with its thirty-one member countries, eleven observer countries and seven permanent international partners, functions as an infrastructure for a supra-national memory community (Assmann 2010b: 103).<sup>6</sup> Counteracting the current loss of a living, communicative memory of the Holocaust, the IHRA aims at stimulating the transition of Holocaust memory into durable forms of remembrance by promoting 'education, remembrance and research about

Toten ruhen zu lassen? Tatsächlich könnte heute das Vergessen eintreten; denn Zeitzeugen sterben, und immer weniger Opfer können das Grauen des Erlittenen persönlich weitertragen. Geschichte verblaßt schnell, wenn sie nicht Teil des eigenen Erlebens war. Deshalb geht es darum, aus der Erinnerung immer wieder lebendige Zukunft werden zu lassen. Wir wollen nicht unser Entsetzen konservieren. Wir wollen Lehren ziehen, die auch künftigen Generationen Orientierung sind' (Herzog 1996).

- 5 Declaration of the Stockholm International on the Holocaust, nd.  
6 The Stockholm conference was initiated by the former Swedish president Göran Persson and was extremely successful, with almost the entire political spectrum of the European Union present, including the former president of the United States, Bill Clinton. According to Jens Kroh (2012: 206), the declaration of the IHRA, formerly called the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research (ITF), is based on the thesis of the uniqueness of the Holocaust. Nevertheless, as the homepage of the IHRA shows, it has now widened its ambit to dealing also with genocide on a more general level.

the Holocaust'.<sup>7</sup> As an intervention against 'the inexorable laws of natural decay and human forgetting', the IHRA seeks to 'translate the transient into the permanent, that is, to invent techniques of transmitting and storing information deemed vital for the constitution and continuation of a specific group' (Assmann 2010a: 43).

### The divided memory

Increasingly, Europe has become a 'politically charged discursive space' in which various memory actors continuously consider 'the relevance of certain topics' and 'draw up a dividing line between what is forgettable and what is valuable for those doing the remembering' (Rigney 2008: 80 and 2016: 70). In the words of Aleida Assmann, the European Union is concerned with selecting what should be perceived as 'vital for a common orientation and a shared remembering' and therefore belong to the European 'canon' and what should remain a latent memory, stored in the 'archive' which is accessible for experts but deemed irrelevant to the broader public (Assmann 2010a: 43). In this process, the Holocaust, perceived as the universalised 'Other of European values', has become a pivotal part of the European 'canon' (Rigney 2014: 344). Along the lines of the aims of the IHRA, the 'recognition of the Holocaust as a collective, painful past' has become obligatory for a nation in order to be considered worthy of becoming a member of the European 'community of values' (Kroh 2012: 206, 211; Van der Laarse 2013: 73).

Nevertheless, after the dissolution of the Iron Curtain and the Eastern enlargement of the European Union from 2004 on, the special status of the Holocaust became a point of contention between the 'old' core of the European Union and the post-Communist countries that increasingly 'demanded the inclusion of

their wartime experiences in the pan-European remembrance of this war' (Mälksoo 2009: 654). Indeed, Maria Mälksoo speaks for a number of scholars in pointing out that there has been a 'noticeable imbalance in both the remembering and the study of the immediate past in the East and the West of Europe':

While the atrocities of the Nazis have been analyzed with remarkable rigor and depth, reaching even the levels of meta-criticism of Holocaust memory and representations ..., the crimes of the communist regimes in the former Soviet bloc have not received similar academic and political attention in Europe. (Mälksoo 2009: 660–1)

According to Claus Leggewie, the biggest challenge of the European Union's memory politics today is forging a European memory that neither flattens out the Holocaust to a universal analogy of all kinds of genocides and thus erases the historical differences between Stalin's terror and the systematic destruction of an entire people, nor lets the Holocaust outcompete Stalin's organised destruction of alleged enemies of the state. Rather, the EU should devote undivided attention to both totalitarian pasts (Leggewie and Lang 2011: 11, 24–5). Nevertheless, the call to incorporate 'the histories of the former communist countries into the large European master narrative' is often accompanied by a tendency to equate the two totalitarianisms (Neumayer 2015: 334–5), thus downplaying the differences between the two types of political crimes. Despite various initiatives launched by the European Union, intellectuals and organisations who endorse the thesis of the Holocaust being a unique event and as a 'dominant site of atrocity and victimhood' are still competing with proponents of the idea that Stalinism and Nazism were 'equally criminal', as the former Latvian minister of foreign affairs and Member of the European Parliament,

7 Declaration of the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust, nd.

Sandra Kalniete, has stated (Kalniete 2004 in Troebst 2005; Rigney 2014: 345; Leggewie and Lang 2011: 127–43).

### Literature as agency of collective memory

I argue that the Ukrainian-German writer Katja Petrowskaja tests possibilities for reconciling the current memory contests between Eastern and Western European versions of the past by simultaneously commemorating specific events of the Holocaust and the terror of the socialist regime during and before her lifetime. As a migrant, the autobiographical narrator of the novel functions as a 'carrier of memories' (Erll 2011: 12) who imparts the experiences of the population living in the Soviet sphere of control to the novel's implied German reader, who is imagined as being ignorant about living conditions in Eastern Europe. Furthermore, the narrator is engaged with telling the story about the major group of the Jewish population of Eastern Europe, who perished outside the concentration camps, and thereby to enlighten an aspect of the Holocaust which she perceives to be excluded from Germany's collective memory. Thus, *Vielleicht Esther* widens the thematic scope of Holocaust novels written by the generations born after 1945.

The autobiographical narrator Petrowskaja recounts her family story from a present point of view in which she looks back at her former limited understanding of history that was formed by her socialist school education. The task of retracing her family history is interwoven with precise descriptions of the memory politics of the Soviet regime – politics that concealed the complexity of the immediate past by means of omnipresent tales of the Great Patriotic War. Hence, she not only depicts the fate of her family during the Nazi occupation, but also unravels the layers of amnesia in the Soviet Union, the disruption of the communicative transmission of memories within the realm of her family, and the simplified Holocaust remembrance in

Germany. By recontextualising the Holocaust and at the same time providing an Eastern European perspective on the past, she disrupts the preconditions of the ongoing memory contest. On the one hand, she disrupts the (Western European) idea of the Holocaust as a unique event by reflecting the need to supplement European history writing with an Eastern European perspective. In particular, she criticises German memory culture for its exclusive focus on the iconic place of Auschwitz that in her view covers up the extensive use of mass shootings for exterminating Jews living in the Eastern European areas. On the other hand, she disrupts the exclusive notion of the Eastern European population as mere victims and points out that the Eastern European countries – particularly Poland and Ukraine – besides Stalinist and Socialist terror should incorporate the Nazi genocide of the Jews and the complicity with the respective regimes in their cultural memories. Her own family history becomes an example of the complex conjunction of victimhood and collaboration in the Eastern European regions, where the Stalinist suppression had already started before the war and continued long after. By reconstructing her grandfather's role as a socialist official, it shows that her grandfather was not merely a victim of Stalin's warfare and later a prisoner of war in Germany; he might also have been an accomplice in the socialistic atrocities which took place before the war.<sup>8</sup>

### The family as mediator of history

By representing her own search for family history, Petrowskaja aims to introduce these previously censored and thus delayed memories as

- 8 As explained in more depth in the last section, Petrowskaja speculates about her grandfather's participation in executing Stalin's catastrophic agricultural politics that led to the starvation of several million people in Soviet Ukraine, the so called Holodomor.



‘salient and vital for a common orientation and a shared [European] remembering’ (Assmann 2010a: 43). According to Ann Rigney, family writings and narrations of individual experience ease the mediation of memories across temporal and cultural boundaries. By presenting ‘individual experience to third parties in a vivid and highly imaginable way’, so Rigney claims, the recipient may become involved in the past of others and thus vicariously include other people’s pasts as ‘prosthetic memory’ (Rigney 2010: 87).<sup>9</sup> In the words of Alison Landsberg, art and especially the mass media may forge a moment of contact between an individual and a historic experience through which ‘the person does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live’ (Landsberg 2004: 2). In this way, a cultural artefact can become an agent for the reorganisation of cultural memory. More precisely, art, by circulating memories across national borderlines, can expand the framework of memory from a national to a transnational one by including events taking place in remote areas of the world. Avishai Margalit observes that ‘thick’ relations in general are relations to ‘the near and dear’, whereas one only produces ‘thin’ and remote relations to the population of other countries (Margalit, quoted in Olick *et al.* 2011: 471; Müller 2010: 28). In contrast, Rigney notes that

the ‘virtual contact with singular experiences’ in another zone of Europe can accomplish an ‘imaginative thickening’ of the reader’s relations to remote and non-familial individuals and thus help to ‘lay the basis for shared points of reference and memories in the future’ (Rigney 2008: 87 and 2012: 622). ‘[C]reative writing [may] help to create “thick” relations with groups with whom one is already economically and politically connected but with whom one does not (yet) share a cultural memory’ (Rigney 2014: 354).

Also Marianne Hirsch argues that the emotional ‘idiom of the family can become an accessible lingua franca, easing identification and projection across distance and difference’ (Hirsch 2008: 114–15).<sup>10</sup> On the one hand, post-memorial writing restores relations within the family by reconstructing memories which were never transmitted from one to the next generation. On the other hand, telling history through the emotionally powerful and ‘thick’ framework of the family offers a possibility for identification for persons without familial relations to Holocaust survivors. Hirsch’s central point of argument is that post-memorial work strives to ‘reactivate and reembody more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression’ (Hirsch 2008: 111). Thus, an unfamiliar version of the past can be changed from a seemingly irrelevant archived memory into a ‘vital’ memory for the individual reader.

9 Prosthetic memory is a term coined by Alison Landsberg (2004). She defines it as a new form of memory that ‘emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experimental site such as a movie theatre or museum. In this moment of contact an experience occurs through which the person sutures himself or herself into a larger history ... In the process I am describing, the person does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live’ (Landsberg 2004: 2).

10 Marianne Hirsch (2008: 106–7) defines post-memory as ‘the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and effectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right.’

Rigney and Hirsch agree on the notion that stories of the past told through the framework of the family may revive archival knowledge and make it relevant for readers living in cultural or national contexts other than those where the recounted events originally took place.

### 'Selection' of the lost

In her novel *Vielleicht Esther*, Petrowskaja uses the 'idiom of the family' precisely in order to familiarise her German readership with historical experiences which took place in a zone of Europe which has usually been considered less 'vital' for an understanding of Europe's devastating past. In the following, I discuss to what degree and by which means Petrowskaja tries to achieve 'thickening' of trans-national relations between her and her family's experiences in Ukraine and her German readership and whether or not she succeeds in reviving and re-embodiment archival forms of knowledge, as Marianne Hirsch suggests.

In her autobiographical novel, Petrowskaja deals with the traumatic past of her Jewish family, who lived through the years of both Nazi and Soviet occupation.<sup>11</sup> On the grounds of an indefinable and seemingly unfounded feeling that something is missing (17) – that an entire generation was lost (21) – the autobiographical narrator obsessively starts to assemble names of distant relatives, relatives that still in 1940 were living in Łódź, Kraków, Kalisz, Kolo, Vienna, Warsaw, Kiev and Paris (26). As the narrator is unable to define which of the Levis, Sterns, Krzewins, Gellers and Hellers might be present-day descendants of those relatives, she decides to include all of them as members of her family. Everything else would be the equivalent

to a 'selection', an impermissible separation between kinsfolk and foreigners, between the familiar and the 'Other' (27).<sup>12</sup> By employing the word 'selection' (*Selektion*), Petrowskaja alludes to the practice of the National Socialists, who upon the arrival of the trains at the concentration camps would sort out those who were unfit for work. Throughout the entire novel, selection as opposed to inclusion is used as a metaphor for the segmentation of cultural memory, which Petrowskaja defines as a typical characteristic of post-socialist memory culture. Warsaw serves as a paradigmatic example of this segmentation. Before visiting the town, she writes, tourists have to choose which city they want to visit: the city of the Warsaw Uprising, which is a central part of Poland's narrative of suffering, or the city of the Jewish ghetto. Only those Jews who died at Katyn – one of the pivotal events of Polish victimisation under Socialism – are considered part of the Polish people. But their wives and children were still Jewish and had to stay in the ghetto and thereby at the margin of Poland's cultural memory (105).<sup>13</sup>

11 In the following, numbers in parentheses refer to Petrowskaja 2015 (all translations are mine).

12 'Die Meinigen sind nicht zu unterscheiden von Hunderten anderer, die genauso hießen, dabei wäre es für mich nicht möglich, die Meinigen von den Fremden zu trennen wie den Weizen von der Spreu, es wäre eine Selektion gewesen, und ich wollte keine, nicht einmal das Wort' (27).

13 'Die Menschen und die anderen Menschen, die Opfer und die anderen Opfer, immer gab es die anderen, egal, woher man kam, Polen und Juden, Juden und Polen, und wenn sie in Katyn umgekommen waren, durften sie Polen sein, aber ihre Frauen und Kinder blieben Juden und lebten im Ghetto' (105). During the Katyn massacre in 1940, the Soviet People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) had all captive members of the Polish officer corps killed. After the war, the Soviet government denied responsibility for this crime and blamed the National Socialist occupation forces.



Despite Petrowskaja's attempt to avoid selection, the logic of the digital archive forces her to do so as Google marks the hits related to her search commands yellow. The yellow colour singles out her search word just as the yellow star singled out the Jews. The Yellow Star that the Jews had to wear during the Nazi regime, made yellow the colour of the Jews, so the autobiographical narrator Petrowskaja. The family name 'Stern', which she 'would have had' if her grandfather had not changed it to Petrowskij for reasons of safety (142), seems to intrinsically connect her family to the stigmatising mark of the Yellow Star. Hence, an eight-page list of people named Stern, which she finds in the Yellow Pages, appears to her an indistinguishable number of 'Yellow Stars' ('Gelbe Sterne', 28). Each yellow marked hit in her Google search, she writes, becomes a building block of her past and thus constitutes her 'Internet Judaism' (52); a Judaism which has no other content than the yellow colour. Hence, Judaism is reduced to selection and Petrowskaja's last connection to the Jewish people is her search for the missing gravestones (184).

### The beginning of history and the end of story-writing

The decisive motivation behind the narrator's attempt at restoring her family history is the death of Lida, the older sister of Petrowskaja's mother. With Lida's death, the last embodied connection to the past vanished. Having learned to cook the traditional Jewish meals and to bake the traditional Jewish pastry from her grandmother, Anna, Lida had been the last person to carry forward their Jewish origin. Lida was also the last person to have continued her family's traditional profession of teaching deaf and mute children. When Lida died, Petrowskaja writes, she understood the meaning of the word history. History is when there is nobody left to ask; when there are only sources left (30). For

decades, Petrowskaja presumes, Lida must have celebrated the birthdays of the murdered in silence, kept secret the war, as well as the time before the war: 'she remembered everything, but revealed nothing' (34). All that is left are 'fragmentary recollections, questionable notes and documents in distant archives' (30).<sup>14</sup>

In the course of the novel, the autobiographical narrator Petrowskaja attempts to assemble the last bits and pieces of family memory and tries to supplement them with material derived from various public archives. Nevertheless, her expectations of being able to order and restore family history are disappointed. The more information she finds, the more questions appear: seventy years after their deaths, she uncovers unknown relatives but loses them the second she finds them as she reads their names on the death records of Yad Vashem (122). All her naive imaginations about the probable lives of present descendants of her relatives are disappointed (28). Furthermore, she proves wrong the myth about the founding father of her family, Ozjel Krzewin, who, according to the family tales, had inherited a school for deaf-mute children from his father and continued a tradition that was passed on for seven generations. Petrowskaja finds a marriage certificate that forces her to alter this tale. The marriage attestation says: 'Hudesa Krzewina, mother of Ozjel Krzewin, illiterate. Ozjel Krzewin, the groom, son of Hudesa, father unknown, age 20' (130). Petrowskaja's mother perceives the information that Ozjel was an illegitimate child as a scandal that her daughter should conceal. The bride, Estera, was a minor and a deaf-mute. According to the family legend, she died young, whereupon Ozjel married Anna, the great-grandmother of Petrowskaja. Nevertheless, documents in the archive prove that Estera outlived Ozjel. But

14 'Was mir blieb: Erinnerungsfetzen, zweifelhafte Notizen und Dokumente in fernen Archiven' (30).

unlike Ozjel, who fled Warsaw in 1915 together with his second wife, Anna, and their daughter, Rosa, Estera and her sons by Ozjel, Adolf and Zygmund, as well as her daughter-in-law, Zygmund's wife, Hela, either perished in the Warsaw Ghetto or were deported and killed. The knowledge she obtains shatters the family myth which used to give her shelter and a sense of origin (94). As Petrowskaja reveals these details as well as her mother's request not to do so, she rejects any censorship of the truth – painful as it may be. Petrowskaja is unable to order and arrange the past – indeed, the past has 'betrayed her expectations' and 'escaped' her hands (133). So, as opposed to writing a coherent family story that could 'revive and reembody' the archived knowledge, as Marianne Hirsch expects, it seems that Petrowskaja can only describe the process of searching and lay open the disappointing results.

### The literary excavation of Babij Jar

In 1941, two years after Ozjel's death, his wife, Anna, as well as one of their daughters, Elena, were killed in the Holocaust. They fell victim to one of the largest mass executions during the Holocaust: the massacre of Babij Jar. So did Petrowskaja's great-grandmother on her father's side, whom he only knew as *babushka*. "I think", her father ponders at some point, "her name was Esther. Yes, maybe Esther".<sup>15</sup> Thereby he expresses an uncertainty that is symptomatic of the entire novel.

Babij Jar was a huge canyon that was formerly located on the outskirts of Kiev. On 29 September 1941, the German occupying forces rounded up and shot 33,771 Jews in the course of two days, using the canyon as a mass grave. Up to 200,000 victims suffered the same fate during the following years. In a central chapter

of the novel, Petrowskaja recollects the public and historical as well as the familial and individual facts of the massacre and traces the different stages of forgetting, distorting and restoring this story. By recounting the politically imposed amnesia of this event, she addresses the rigid memory politics of the Soviet regime that inhibited the perception of the genocide against the Jews as different from 'the tragedy of all Soviet people (whether Jews, Russians, Belarusians, Ukrainians)' (Baranova 2015). The official version of the Second World War and the Nazi occupation was 'an important tool in state propaganda' and 'the narrative of the War was masterly used by the authorities for the formation of a unifying Soviet identity' (*ibid.*). The neglect of the Jewish aspect of the massacre was necessary in order to shape a sense of unity. Both the living and the dead had to belong to the big 'enforced family' of the Soviet Union (228). The entire Soviet population was victimised in the same way, nobody collaborated, and everybody fought for liberation from fascism – a liberation which the Great Patriotic War finally achieved – according to the official narration. When she was a child, the autobiographical narrator Petrowskaja reports, the Great Patriotic War was her most important access to world history (229). She fervently participated in the celebration of the 9 May (230–1) and played 'us against the fascists' in the backyard (40). Only later did she discover what was left out of this history: for most of the countries in the Eastern bloc – including her native Ukraine – the 9 May did not mean liberation but 'the beginning [of] a different oppressive regime for the states occupied by the Red Army' (Leggewie 2008: 220).

As a consequence of this amalgamation of memory, the Soviet regime did not consider Babij Jar as a place worthy of special attention (190). On the contrary, it was used as a garbage dump by a tile factory, filled up with mud from a broken dam and eventually levelled and turned into a park. As Petrowskaja remarks, 'the Soviet

15 'Ich glaube, sie hieß Esther, sagte mein Vater. Ja, vielleicht Esther' (209).

government wanted to liquidate Babij Jar as a place too' (189). In 1961, a famous poem by the Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko finally broke the silence about the massacre, identifying the Jews as its main victims and addressing the lack of a memorial. The poem was translated into no less than seventy languages. Nevertheless in Kiev, so Petrowskaja asserts, the concealment went on (191). It was only after more than twenty years of silence that 'public pressure resulted in a small memorial'. However, the inscription still included the event in the overall history of the Soviet martyrdom. It reads: 'Here in 1941–3, the German fascist invaders executed more than 100,000 citizens of Kiev and prisoners of war' (Gitelman 1997: 20). Also a pompous Soviet monument, which was erected a decade later, ignored the fact that only the Jews were systematically persecuted because of their ethnic origins. Finally, fifty years after the massacre, a menorah monument was erected at the correct place and in memory of the Jewish victims (Oldberg 2011). In the following years, a great number of other monuments were erected, each dedicated to different victim groups: one to the executed Ukrainian nationalists (1992), one for two Orthodox priests (2000), and another one for the murdered children. Ingmar Oldberg (2011) notes that the erection of the great number of other memorials weakens the impact of the menorah monument. As in Warsaw, Petrowskaja understands this wealth of memorials as a segmentation of memory and thus once again as a 'selection' that excludes the Jewish genocide from the collective memory of Ukraine (191).

### Identifying the blind spot of family memory

As individual memory is inevitably influenced by the social environment, the framework of memory dictated by the Soviet regime caused a blind spot in Petrowskaja's family memory. As Babij Jar was omitted from the cultural mem-

ory of the Soviet Union, it was excluded from the 'politically shared discursive space which regulates what is important and sayable at any given time' (Rigney 2016: 70). As Rigney further points out, making archival traces 'shareable' is a complex matter and the lack of media that could make Babij Jar into a 'shared representation' seemed to impede the private transmission as well (*ibid.* 70). As a child, Petrowskaja and her parents paid annual visits to Babij Jar. Unaware of her family's connection to this place and only dimly aware of the atrocities which had taken place there, she experienced the tours as a 'life-affirming ritual'. Much later, her parents explained to her that their grandparents were 'laid to rest' in Babij Jar (187). But also this belated transmission of the family trauma contained an omission: it omitted the circumstances of their deaths and the issue of who was responsible (197). Her attempt to restore this part of her family history puts to the test her ability to substitute empirical connections to the past with 'imaginative investment projection and creation' (Hirsch 2008: 107). In order for narrations to be considered as postmemory, following Hirsch, information derived from private archives, such as fragmented stories, photos (or – as it is the case in *Vielleicht Esther* – cooking recipes) are blended and supplemented with fictional elements often bolstered by material from public archives. Postmemory is an almost compulsory attempt to restore the broken chain of communicative transmission of memories through imagination. Postmemorial art, one could add by referring to Ann Rigney, invents a language for an event that, in the absence of a medium, had not been 'turned into a sharable and shared representation' (Rigney 2016: 70). Nevertheless, just as the autobiographical narrator Petrowskaja is unable to create a coherent story about her Polish ancestors, her 'salvaging fantasy' also fails when it comes to converting the information she gathers about her great-grandmothers to a 'sharable' narration (77). This is the case, even

though both her mother and her father have testimonies from individuals who witnessed the events. For example, Anna's former housekeeper, Natascha, had told Rosa, the narrator's grandmother on her mother's side, that she had accompanied Anna and Elena part of the way to the determined meeting place. She reported how Anna had calmed her down, expressing the reassuring conviction that there was nothing to fear (197).<sup>16</sup> The passage begins with a vivid imagination of how Natascha, constantly crying, had followed Anna along the crowded Bolschaja Shitomirskajato that led to Babij Jar. Yet Petrowskaja refrains from representing the conversation between Natascha and Anna in direct speech. Instead, she makes use of 'indirect transposed speech', in which the narrator constantly remains present as an active interpreter (Genette 2010: 110). By not pretending that it is Anna and Natascha themselves who speak, she produces a distance that inhibits the impression of authenticity. Petrowskaja uses the same narrative form, when she re-narrates what she had learned about the fate of 'maybe Esther', the *babushka* of her father. The housekeeper of her father's former home had told him what he had seen from the window (223). Petrowskaja envisages that she herself witnesses the scene from the window 'as if she was god', thus simultaneously employing a subjective and an omnipresent point of view. From this contradictory perspective, she imagines seeing how the old and frail woman, who can hardly walk, addresses two German officers. The narrator imagines how 'maybe Esther' politely asked the officers to help her reach the meeting place. Convinced to speak German, she addresses the officers in Yiddish. Immediately after, the narrator withdraws this version and imagines another wording in

which maybe Esther trustfully asks the way to Babij Jar – the place where she is supposed to be killed. Either way, the outcome of the scene is the same: the officers shoot her without even interrupting their conversation (221).<sup>17</sup> By constantly informing the reader about her uncertainty about how to tell this event and about her incapability of picturing the scene in a realistic manner, Petrowskaja indicates the fictional character of her account. Despite her alleged omnipresent point of view, she cannot come any closer to the characters and thus fails in shaping an imaginative contact to the past in the manner of a postmemorial work of art:

No matter how hard I stretch myself in order to look at their faces, tense the muscles of my memory, my phantasy, and my intuition, I do not see their faces, that of the German officers and that of Babushka. I cannot see their faces, do not understand, and the history books are silent. (221)<sup>18</sup>

This unsatisfying position is as close as she can get to her family trauma. Referring to the traditional metaphor of writing as weaving, Petrowskaja remarks that she cannot satisfy the need to spin together the scraps and loose threads of information (134). Her family history cannot be restored as coherent narration but merely as fragmented accumulations of information which only momentarily concentrate around short but nonetheless powerful

16 'Sie weinte unaufhörlich, und Anna tadelte Natascha für ihre Tränen, beruhige dich, zu den Deutschen hatten wir schon immer gute Beziehungen' (197).

17 'Sie wurde auf der Stelle erschossen, mit nachlässiger Routine, ohne dass das Gespräch unterbrochen wurde, ohne sich ganz umzudrehen, ganz nebenbei' (221).

18 'Sosehr ich mich bemühe, ihre Gesichter zu sehen, in ihre Gesichter zu blicken, von Babuschka und von dem Offizier, sosehr ich mich auch strecke um sie anzuschauen und alle Muskeln meines Gedächtnisses, meiner Phantasie und meiner Intuition anspanne – es geht nicht' (221).

attempts to imagine what might have happened. Thus, *Vielleicht Esther* could be characterised as a meta-text about a novel that is impossible to write.

### The archive as educational tool

Does Petrowskaja thus fail in reviving the archive 'with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression', which, according to Hirsch, is essential to post-memorial writing (Hirsch 2008: 111)? Indeed, her helpless reactions to the information she obtains, her declared incapability of creating a comprehensible story, and her distanced manner of narrating seem to indicate this. The various archives she searches do not lift the veil separating her from the past but rather complicate it. Furthermore, she seems inferior to the archive of the internet as Google's algorithms prevent her from finding anything else than what she expected all along (12). Rigney assumes that in order to enable contemporary readers 'to imagine themselves in unfamiliar social frames' they need to get a vivid and highly imaginable access to the historic event (Rigney 2008: 87). However, this precondition does not seem to exist in the case of *Vielleicht Esther*. Nonetheless, I suggest that Petrowskaja's manner of laying open disjointed scraps of a shattered family history has the potential to 'thicken' the relation of the reader to the traumatic legacy: the novel offers the reader the opportunity to identify, not with the victims, but with the position of the autobiographical narrator Petrowskaja herself (*ibid.* 87). The reader is invited to share with her the position of a descendant who only learns about the traumatic past of her family when it is too late to get access to embodied memories and is thus left with loose scraps and threads which she is unable to reunite.

Exactly through the lens of this fragmented family history, Petrowskaja points out the gaps in the official German understanding of the past.

One of her main concerns is to moderate the major attention given to Auschwitz as the 'geographical center' of the Holocaust (Ezrahi 1996: 126). The aim of 'translating' the massacre of Babij Jar into the German framework of memory becomes obvious in a passage in which she directly addresses an implied (German) reader, whom she expects to be totally uninformed about the event. Recounting her father's flight from Kiev, she writes:

the tribal brothers of this boy, although tribal brother is such an unbiased word, let's say Jews ... well, those who stayed were rounded up in Babij Jar ... and there they were shot. But of course you know that. After all, Kiev is as far away from Berlin as Paris. (218)<sup>19</sup>

The geographical distance between Berlin and Paris may well be equal to that between Berlin and Kiev, Petrowskaja implies, but the mental distance between north and south is much smaller than that between west and east. Therefore, one of the major atrocities of the national socialist occupiers does not play any significant role in Germany's cultural memory. This lack is embodied in a librarian, who upon Petrowskaja's request for books about the massacre of Babij Jar, asks: 'Meinen sie Baby Jahr?' ('Do you mean baby year?', 183). By circulating the history of Babij Jar, its enforced absence in family memory, its marginalization in German memory, as well as the impossibility of restoring it, Petrowskaja aims to widen her readers' understanding of Europe and European history

19 'Die Stammesbrüder dieses Jungen [ihres Vaters], die, die in der Stadt geblieben waren, obwohl, Stammesbrüder ist ein neutraler Begriff, lassen Sie uns Juden sagen ..., also die, die geblieben waren, wurden in Babij Jar zusammengetrieben ... Und dort wurden sie erschossen. Aber das wissen Sie bestimmt. Kiew ist von hier genauso weit entfernt wie Paris' (218).



and at the same time to inscribe the Holocaust into Eastern European history writing.<sup>20</sup> Even though Petrowskaja does not succeed in reviving the archive in the narrow sense of imagining the individual fates behind the historic facts in any realistic way, she nonetheless succeeds by describing her own need to interact with archival material, by questioning the ability of the archive to reveal unquestionable truths about the past and by informing her German readership about events she suspects to be marginalised in the public perception of the European past.

### The silence of the grandfather

In the last chapter of the novel, Petrowskaja turns to the riddle of her grandfather Wassilij, who was victimised by both totalitarian regimes. Thus, his life story exemplifies the interconnection between the National Socialist and the Communist atrocities which makes it necessary to remember those histories together. By unravelling the story of her grandfather, Petrowskaja both addresses the subject of the non-Jewish victims of the Second World War and the grey zone of being victim and perpetrator at the same time. Given that ‘categories such as victims, perpetrators, collaborators and bystanders ... are very difficult to apply’ as ‘individuals and national and ethnic groups in this region often shifted their roles with the many, often violent, turns’, Petrowskaja hereby deals with an unresolved and painful aspect of the past (Sindbæk Andersen and Törnquist-Plewa 2016: 2).

As the only Ukrainian in the family, he fought in the Great Patriotic War. In 1941, he was captured during an ambush attack and

deported to the notorious Austrian camp of Mauthausen. After having survived the catastrophic conditions of his imprisonment, he returned to the Soviet Union only to be captured by his own fellow countrymen and sent to a Siberian camp. A woman helped him to escape and they settled together in Kiev. Even though he lived in an apartment block nearby, he only returned to his wife, Rosa, and their two daughters forty-one years after he went off to war.

As a prisoner of war, her grandfather was one of the many millions of victims who were excluded from the cultural remembrance of the Soviet Union. Whereas the surviving soldiers were celebrated in pompous parades every 9 May – a festivity which was supposed to unite the entire population of the Soviet Union in the joy of victory – the millions and millions of Russian prisoners of war were never mentioned (228). As Petrowskaja ironically remarks, it was forbidden to be imprisoned during the war, and if it happened anyway it was forbidden to survive. The survivor is a traitor and death is better than betrayal (231).<sup>21</sup> When he finally returned, her grandfather kept silent about his experiences: those during the war, those of his imprisonment and those after his liberation. For the autobiographical narrator Petrowskaja, there is something troubling about his silence and she fears that it hides a terrible guilt. In particular, she becomes suspicious about his role in the socialist regime. Why did the Great Purge between 1936 and 1938 not affect him even though he had undertaken several trips to the Baltic States because of his high position in the Ministry of Agriculture (228) – a fact that was usually enough to be accused of betrayal? What was his role as deputy head of Kiev’s cattle

20 Petrowskaja also circulates various other incidents that took place in Eastern European and which she suspects to be marginalised in European history writing too; e.g. the man-made famine in Ukraine (43), the siege of Leningrad (69–73) and the fate of the Russian Prisoners of War (231, 251–2).

21 ‘In Gefangenschaft zu geraten ist verboten, und wenn doch, ist es verboten zu überleben. Dies war eine der unausgesprochenen sowjetischen Kriegsaporien. Wer überlebt, ist ein Verräter, und der Tod ist besser als Verrat’ (231).



breeding? Did he have something to do with the forced collectivisation of the agricultural land, which resulted in the devastating man-made famine, the Holodomor, during which millions of inhabitants of Ukraine starved to death? And why did he not return to his wife and two daughters after his liberation? She cannot help speculating if her grandfather had made himself guilty of something that had made it impossible for him to face his Jewish wife. Could it have something to do with the Jewish inmates that arrived in the subcamp Gunskirchen where he was imprisoned at that time? Only two weeks before the end of the war, a great number of Hungarian Jews were forced on a death march from Mauthausen to Gunskirchen. Pointing out the fate of the Hungarian Jews and the fact that the Austrian subcamp Gunskirchen was still in the process of being erected when Auschwitz had already been liberated, she once again draws attention to a marginalised aspect of the Holocaust that has been conveniently forgotten so as not to overshadow the role of Auschwitz as a symbolic centre of the Holocaust (242). Investigating this event, she finds out that the water and food supply of the camp broke down when the weakened inmates arrived. Knowing that her grandfather was located in Gunskirchen together with the Hungarian Jews, she cannot help thinking that only the worst people survived: 'There was almost no water in Gunskirchen and if my grandfather survived, it means that somebody else had to die in his place' (275).<sup>22</sup>

Using the biblical metaphor of *Paradis*, she connects the possible guilt of Wassilij with the political guilt of the Soviet Union (238). Her grandfather had a small country house, a traditional Russian *dacha*, and in the middle of the

kitchen garden was a paradisaal apple tree. Using the metaphor of the Fall of Man, she suspects the apples to be contaminated with the blood of others. She recounts that such a tree was also situated in front of a beautiful little palace in the centre of the city of Kiev. In her childhood and youth, she used to go there a lot. She describes it as a beautiful, paradise-like place. But at some point, she learns that the palace was the central torture chamber of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKWD) in the 1930s. In connecting the park in front of the palace with her grandfather's garden through the metaphoric picture of the paradisaal apple tree, the garden is turned into a symbol of the 'enforced big family' (228) of the Soviet Union in which the biodiversity of the flora was increased, whereas the species of men were forcefully reduced (236).

## Conclusion

Belonging to the third generation born after the Holocaust, Petrowskaja exemplifies a new level of Holocaust writing in her novel *Vielleicht Esther*. This writing is influenced by the ever-increasing distance from the Second World War, the subsequent loss of embodied memory and the opening of the Eastern European archives. By trying to restore her personal family history, Petrowskaja draws attention to archival material which has long been 'concealed in the Western public consciousness' and thus deemed irrelevant for 'the "European account" of World War Two' (Mälksoo 2009: 654). Her family history undermines fixed perceptions of the past as it introduces the German reader to lesser-known aspects of the Holocaust as well as to atrocities committed by the Stalinist and Soviet regimes such as the Holodomor, the imprisonment of returning prisoners of war by the Soviets, and the prisoners' exclusion from the cultural memory of the Soviet Union. Thus, she both shows the necessity to understand the Holocaust as an integral part of Eastern European history

22 'Woran ich dachte – ... dass die Schlechtesten überlebt haben... dass es kaum Wasser im Lager gab, und wenn mein Großvater überlebt hat, bedeutet es, dass jemand an seiner Stelle sterben musste' (275).

writing and the necessity of recontextualising the Holocaust by breaking it down to specific events instead of using it as a common moral icon. When writing about her grandfather, she approaches a particularly difficult and painful part of the past. Even though he suffered tremendously both during his imprisonment as a Russian prisoner of war and in the Gulag, he is not a mere victim. Her investigations into his time of imprisonment condenses the interrelation between Nazism and Stalinism that makes it impossible to determine unambiguously the question of who was victim and who was perpetrator. Translated to the public realm, Petrowskaja's autobiographical novel endorses a multifaceted understanding of Europe that spends 'undivided attention towards both totalitarian pasts' (Leggewie and Lang 2011: 11, 24–5), avoids to simplify history and instead faces the complicated entanglement of suffering and guilt on both sides of the former Iron Curtain. ■

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